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ABSTRACT

Contradictions are inherent in the evaluation of placement test writing, contradictions that at once value and devalue writers and writing, readers and reading. In testing, the evidence for the essay's effectiveness rests almost entirely on the writer's choice of linguistic forms. The characteristics that distinguish evaluation in competency testing are (1) the final evaluation of what are, in effect, first drafts; (2) the use of those first drafts to assess both text quality and writer ability; and (3) the centrality of linguistic forms as evidence for both. These characteristics create complex dilemmas for writers and readers in negotiating appropriate placements. A taxonomy of new, inferable, and old information in noun phrases (developed by E. Prince) was used to evaluate essays written by 99 incoming students at Temple University (Pennsylvania). While analysis showed that the more complex forms of unused and of brand-new information influenced reader judgments significantly, these entities did not seem to function the way the taxonomy predicts, had writers and readers actually been cooperating with each other in the exchange of information. (A copy of the information taxonomy as well as samples of evaluated essays are included.) (NKA)

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Negotiating Expectations:

Writing and Reading Placement-tests

Six years ago, I was asked by our Dean to devise procedures that would make our placement-testing practices more consistent and accurate than they had been. To do that I drew upon the best of the literature in the theory and method of assessing writing ability, developing written rubrics, anchor essays, and holistic rating scale (Diederich, 1974; Cooper, 1977; Myers, 1980; Odell, 1981). Though our records indicate that placement has become more reliable, readers' judgments more consistent, I soon discovered that the procedures I had developed did not adequately explain that consistency. Rather, the situation is much more complex than all my reading had led me to believe. Contradictory impulses motivate evaluation of writing in the situational context of placement-testing, contradictions that at once value and devalue writers and writing, readers and reading. Inevitably, these contradictions play themselves out in the ways texts are produced, interpreted, and judged. What I want to do today is to describe those contradictions that to me distinguish placement-testing as a "speech event," (Hymes, 1972) and then to examine how those contradictions influence the way placement is negotiated--particularly how readers decide whether texts meet the expectation that writers provide "new" information in discourse (Shaughnessy, 1977; Bartholomae, 1980).

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Consider, for a moment, the following characterization of writing ability as

> the ability to discover what one wishes to say and to convey one's message through language, syntax, and content that are appropriate for one's audience and purpose (emphasis in original). (Odell, 1981, p. 103)

In at least one way, of course, this definition presupposes a situation very different from that which holds in placement-testing. At Temple, students are given one hour to respond, impromptu, to one of several "prompts" assigned by evaluators. They are given about ten minutes to prepare their essays, and since they have been given no access to sources of information on the topics, they have only whatever information is readily "at hand." The result is that the texts produced are by no means finished pieces; they are first drafts. Writers have neither the time nor the information to produce anything but. Whether or not texts are always incomplete, as the ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1972) and the reception theorists (Pratt, 1977; Fish, 1980) claim, they certainly are in this situation.

Readers, for their part, complement writers' role in the situation: by necessity, their evaluations are both cursory and superficial. They too have little time--our readers average about 3 minutes per essay. And if they do not approach the topics "cold"--in fact, they've often had a hand in constructing the topics--their problem is the converse of the writers': they have too much information. I mean that not only in the sense that they are more widely read than the writers, though that is, usually, true, but also in the sense that, very quickly, readers come to know all the arguments writers are likely to bring to bear on a given topic. In a typical summer of placement-testing, we

will evaluate the essays of some 3500 entering lower-division students. It does not take long, then, for readers to be able to predict, from a text's beginning, the argument the writer is likely to make, a fact which, given the time constraints, often means that readers don't follow it very closely, even when they think they have.

In other ways, however, the situation presupposed by rhetorically-based definitions of writing ability accords very well with the actual situation of placement-testing. the evaluation itself has a dual purpose. Scores given to essays are meant to represent readers' judgement of the overall quality of the text--the success with which the text's message is communicated. But the scores also represent a judgement about the writer, about his or her ability to meet expectations teachers at Temple have for entering students. Given the situation I've already described, that's an important distinction. Since the texts themselves are incomplete first drafts, the fact that an essay does not achieve the classic Aristotelian virtues certainly detracts from the quality of the text, but as evidence of the writer's ability it is ambiguous. It may be that the writer lacks the necessary resources, or it may mean that the writer risked pursuing a particularly subtle issue, which often happens in first drafts and which is an expectation common to academic discourse.

The problem is that the situation itself is very much at odds with what exists elsewhere. To quote Richard Lloyd-Jones: "In the real world, as opposed to the world of the testmaker, transactional discourse is judged by what it accomplishes. . . . In the test world, nothing happens, so some method of analysis and description must be devised" (1977, pp. 40-41). Though one might argue that the consequences of a test can be very "real," Lloyd-Jones' point, I take it, is that language forms become salient in this situation to

an extent they hardly ever do in other uses of language. Evidence for the effectiveness of a salesperson's pitch is whether or not the customer buys the car. Evidence for the effectiveness of Ronald Reagan's recent "apologia pro vita sua" is whether or not the public accepts his position as sincere and credible. Only in testing does the evidence for the effectiveness of a piece of discourse rest almost entirely on the writer's choice of linguistic forms.

It is these characteristics that I have found to distinguish the practice of evaluation in the context of competency testing: the final evaluation of what are, in effect, first drafts; the use of those first drafts to assess both text quality and writer ability; and the centrality of linguistic forms as evidence for both. These characteristics create complex dilemmas for writers and readers in negotiating appropriate placements. In particular, for writers to be certified as competent, the "significance" of linguistic forms that depart from expectations for effective communication must be determined in a situation in which the source of the departures must remain uncertain.

It is that issue I have pursued in my studies of placement-testing practices at Temple. In my analyses of placement essays (1985, 1986), I have found that ways writers represent information may add nothing to, or even impede, communication of text content: in particular, writers represent as "new" information that in important respects is not new at all. Nonetheless, these texts are evaluated positively by readers, who seem to interpret this strategy as evidence that writers know how to meet expectations even though the linguistic forms used do little or nothing to communicate the text's message.

The study from which these analyses were taken used placement-test essays written by 99 incoming lower-division students during the summer of 1982. All topics were structured to elicit the same kind of transactional writing. Two readers evaluated each text, using a 1 (low) to 6 (high) holistic scale. Essays receiving combined scores between 2 and 6 were deemed "ineffective," their writers placed into one of two full-tuition non-credit basic writing courses. Those with combined scores between 8 and 12 were deemed "effective," their writers placed into the university's first-year composition course. Those with combined scores of 7 were third-read by me or by the most experienced teaching assistant in the group. Placement depended upon our final judgement and on writers' score on a multiple-choice test of usage and mechanics.

The analysis is based on a taxonomy of given/new information contained in noun phrases, developed by Prince (1981), which classifies information represented in noun phrases accordinfg to how familiar readers are assumed to be with it. Overall, information is assumed to be New, Inferable, or old (which she terms evoked). Each category is further subdivided. The complete taxonomy is given on page one of your handout. Here, I want to concentrate on ways new information can be represented in texts. First, let me describe the two, very different, kinds of information represented as "New."

Brand-new information represents things assumed new <u>both</u> to the discourse and to readers. The writer hasn't mentioned the information before and doesn't assume readers can identify it either. This kind of information is cast in indefinite noun phrases. Consider the example (1) on your hand-out, in which the underlined noun phrase specifies that a partcular man went to Penn, but does not presuppose that readers are familiar with that entity.

Unused information, by contrast, represents things new to the discourse but assumed known to readers. The information need not be salient in readers' consciousnesses, but the writer has reason to believe the information is available in readers' memories. Proper names make up the bulk of such entities--but not all. For instance, in the example on your handout:

In the real world, discourse is judged by what it accomplishes.

the referent of the underlined phrase is assumed known to the reader, even though it has not appeared previously in the discourse.

The subcategories of Brand New and Unused information reflect the fact that these entity types can be linked, using a complex noun phrase, to other information in the text. Contrast the two examples on your handout:

(1) A man went to Penn. (Brand-new, unlinked)

(2) A man I know went to Penn. (Brand-new, linked)

In (2) the entity represented as a man is linked to an entity, I, assumed more familiar to readers. The form of the noun phrase, though still presupposing that readers cannot identify the information definitely, does function to clarify its relevance to the discourse.

That linkage functions quite differently for Unused information. Writers must usually take into account a group of readers whose knowledge and beliefs will differ from member to member. On the one hand, writers need to give those readers with insufficient knowledge enough information for them to identify as definitely as possible the entity being referred to; on the other hand, they don't want to give unnecessarily redundant information to more knowledgeable readers. Linking unused information to other information allows writers to be co-operative with both kinds of readers.

In the example on your handout,

"In their methodological reflections. . . ,scholars such as Kenneth Burke and Ernst Cassirer have found the question of function. . . indispensible."

the form of the underlined noun phrase allows less knowledgeable readers to infer at least the sort of scholars who belong to the class being identified.

Analyses of the 6207 pieces of information represented by noun phrases in the 99 essays showed that use of the more complex forms of Unused information and of Brand-new information influenced readers judgements significantly. Use of the former influenced judgements moderately (.42; p= .001). Use of the latter influenced readers' judgements slightly, though more significantly (.26; p= .005). The slightness of the correlation is somewhat misleading, because relatively few writers relied on this entity to any extent. Those who did, however, were consistently judged as competent.

The problem is that these entities don't seem to function the way the taxonomy predicts. With the use of brand-new, linked information, even the kind of information formulated as Brand-new differs in important ways from what we would expect, had writers and readers actually been co-operating with each other in the exchange of information. In her analyses, Prince found that Brand-new, linked information generally represented specific indefinites, reference to some one individual or thing assumed unfamiliar to the reader, as in

John wants to marry a Norwegian, and there she is in the corner.

where the form of "a Norwegian" presupposes readers' unfamiliarity with it while the pronoun presupposes that the writer is specifying a particular member of the class named.

Those in the students' writing much more often represent non-specific indefinites, if not generics. Essay One in the handout is typical. Of the 11 entities labeled Brand-new, linked, at least 7, and possibly 9, represent non-specific indefinites. When this writer refers to "a group discussion," "a book report following questions written up by the school," or "a book from a school," she seems to be representing as new, i.e., unfamiliar to readers, information that she could reasonably have represented much more specifically and definitely, given the topic of discussion in this student's essay. But she did not, and the score of 8 given to the essay is evidence that readers certified her as competent, despite the fact that the text fails to communicate anything of substance.

Given the form of the text, readers could have chosen to place the writer into our non-credit basic writing course, on the grounds that the text is vague and incoherent, not to mention all the problems with syntax and usage it contains. Instead, readers seem to have evaluated this strategy as evidence that the writer is able at least to "act as if" she has something new to say, even though she may be unable or unwilling to say it. The use of the complex noun phrase gives the appearance of clarifying the relevance of unfamiliar information, while in fact doing nothing of the sort. This kind of style is well-known in the world of school assignments. It is that of the writer who knows "How to Say Nothing in Five Hundred Words" (Roberts, 1958), one who can construct the form of a text even if sacrificing its substance. And it is an "ability" presumed,if not valued, by our first-year composition course.

By contrast, use of Unused, linked entities does add substantive information to a text. But its use does not seem necessary to enable readers to identify the information referred to. Essay Two in your handout is a

typical example. Neither the reference to the authors of Oedipus the King and of Othello nor the reference to Lord Acton as the author of the final quotation is necessary to identify the information. Readers who could not already identify Oedipus or the source of the quotation are not likely to be able to identify the named authors. Few readers, on the other hand, do not know who wrote Othello. Yet, given the choice, the writer consistently preferred to cast entities in a form that assumed otherwise, but which gave readers no additional information. And, he was rewarded for having done so.

Use of this strategy appears to be an attempt to establish that writers' credibility, especially by appealing to shared traditions. Had the writer of Essay Two wished to illustrate his point with examples of books typically the target of book-banners, he would likely have picked books by such popular authors of sexually explicit adolescent literature as Judy Blume. Instead, this writer refers to "Sophocles's 'Oedipus the King'" and "his (i.e., "Shakespeare") Othello." The quotation at the end of the essay only serves further to identify as shared that literate tradition from which the quote was taken, as does reference to "The Russian Revolution of 1917." That is not a tradition likely to have been shared by many of the readers supposedly addressed by the topic, in this case citizens of a small town in rural Pennsylvania. Indeed, had they been the actual readers, they might have interpreted these assumptions quite differently. But this writer knew well that the audience invoked was not the audience to be addressed (Ede and Lunsford, 1984)

My concern in this paper has been to document how contradictions in the situation create special norms for the way placement is negotiated between writers and readers. What I find significant about this negotiation is the

extent to which the situation puts writers and readers into a double bind. Writers can be evaluated as violating some expectation no matter how they construct their texts. I have seen readers evaluate texts similar to the second example as "trite" and "pompous." And readers can certainly be second-guessed no matter how they evaluate a text. It would be all too easy for us to condemn, as a "lowering of standards," readers' evaluation of that first essay. But, it is also important to remember that participants in this situation only respond to these norms; they do not construct them. Rather, institutional priorities create the contradictions inherent in placement-testing, so that if we want to change the "terms" on which placement is negotiated, we must do more than tinker with testing procedures. We must address those constituencies that determine the priorities.

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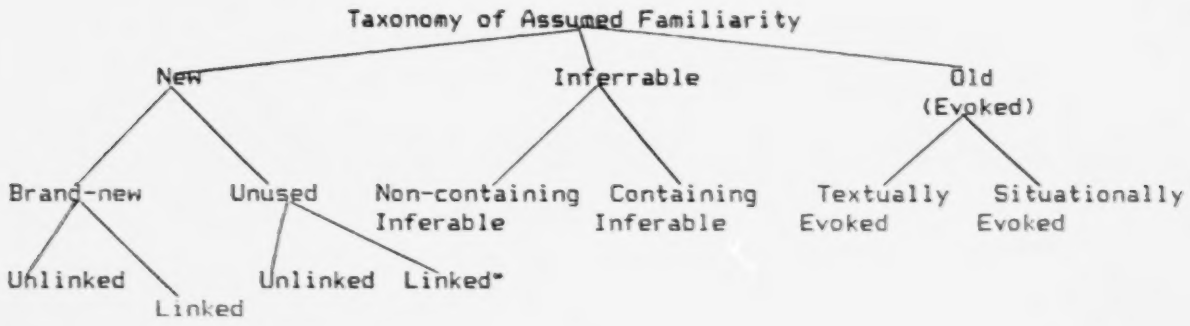

A New: an entity first introduced into the discourse.

1. Brand-new: entity new in discourse and assumed unfamiliar to hearer.

   a. unlinked: unconnected syntactically to any other entity.
      Example: A man went to Penn.

   b. linked: connected, through an NP contained within it, to another discourse entity.
      Example: A man that I know went to Penn.

2. Unused: entity new in discourse but assumed to be known to the hearer.

   a. unlinked
      Example: In the real world, discourse is judged by what it accomplishes.

   b. linked
      Example: In their methodological reflections. . . ,scholars such as Kenneth Burke and Ernst Cassirer have found the question of function indispensible.

B Inferable: entity assumed discoverable through logical or plausible reasoning from other entities in the discourse.

1. Non-containing: the inference is to be made between entities in different syntactic constructions.
   Example: I walked into the classroom. The students were milling about.

2. Containing: the inference is to be made between entities contained within a single syntactic construction.
   Example: One of these eggs is rotten.

C Old (Evoked): an entity assumed to be present in the current discourse model.

1. Textually: presence assumed because it has been introduced through the spoken or written text.

2. Situationally: presence assumed because it represents participants or feature of extratextual context, including text.

* These two subcategories do not appear as such in the original taxonomy.

Adapted from E. Prince (1981), Toward a taxonomy of given-new information, in P. Cole (Ed.), Radical pragmatics. New York: Academic Press.

Example One

Essay Relying on Brand-new, linked Information
(Total Essay Score of 8)

Topic: Suppose that your school board has proposed to ban certain books from the high school library on the grounds that they contain foul language or explicit sex. Write an essay for your local newspaper that explains to the school board your position as a student on this issue. Be sure to include good reasons for your stand.

Banning books due to unethical content has become a rising issue in high school libraries (BNL;S). The high schools don't want anything to do with books that contain foul language and/or explicit sex (BNL;NS). Instead of banning such books, the schools could use these books as a way of teaching the students what is actually contained in the books and how to deal with it (BNL;S?). The students would read the books anyway, whether receiving them from school or somewhere else. Instead of having the students get the book from somewhere else and just reading the "trashy" parts, the schools could form some sort of program (BNL;NS). One idea could be a group discussion (BNL;NS). A few students could read the book & then discuss it with a teacher, a librarian, etc. Another program would be that if a student wanted to check the book out of a library he would have to get his parent's permission. The student would also have to write a book report following questions written up by the school (BNL;NS).

Sex, violence, and language have all become a big part in today's society (BNL;S?). Sex, especially has become more outspoken, it is displayed on T.V., in magazines, in the movies, and in books. Banning these books aren't going to shelter the students over the issues. In my opionion it's just an easy way out for the high schools (BNL;S), one less problem to deal with.

I can see the school's point on one hand, that by keeping these books the parents of students might get upset. Even some of the parents are ignorant. They won't let their child read a book from a school (BNL;NS), but they will let them go to the movies where sex is displayed on the screen in front of the child's eyes.

The whole issue of banning books should be brought up before the school board, but the issue should be to keep the books; devise programs to teach the students what is in them, what the author was saying, etc. The issue should be talked over with the parents. Maybe the parents could read the books with their children & discuss what sex is about & what is ethical & what isn't.

Books should not be banned from high school libraries. If a student wants to read a book that isn't up to "standards," (BNL;NS) then there should be some institutionilized guidance to go along with it (BNL;NS), otherwise, the student will get the book from somewhere else just to be rebelious & find out what it is that's so bad in the books.

Note: BNL= Brand-new, linked; S= Specific, NS= Non-specific.

Example Two

Essay Relying on Unused, linked Information
(Total Score of 12)

The school board of Emmaus High School (UL) has been considering a ban on certain books in its high school library . As a student of this school and a citizen of the free and democratic United States I must vehemently protest this action. If the school board votes to ban certain books because of lewd language or explicit sex what is to stop them or other institutions from banning books for political, social or religious reasons? Limited censorship can be a dangerous thing because it is a power that is very easily abused.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 (UL) one of the first things the new regime did was [to] ban books "offensive" to the government. Many of these books were not offensive because they contained explicit sex or foul language but because they conveyed ideas and principles that conflicted with those of the government. In many cases explicit sex and foul language were used as excuses for this censorship. In Nazi Germany (U) book burning (UL) was common. Today (UL) Russia and other Communist-block countries (U) actively censor and burn books. Giving anyone the power to censor books is unwise, there is always the danger of getting carried away and grasping too much power, as the activities of Russia and other such nations plainly show.

The censorship of books and repression of intellectual activity for whatever reasons are the first step toward a totalitarian regime. If school boards are given the right to censor books perhaps the government (UL) will one day wish to ban books in schools and universities supported by federal funds. Once the wheel starts rolling it will be difficult to stop. The government might then wish to censor other aspects of citizens' lives.

Many works of fine literature contain foul language and explicit sex. Some of these works would be incomplete without them. Would one censor Sophocles's "Oedipus the King" (UL) because it contains references to incest and also violence? Should Shakespeare (U) be banned because his "Othello" (UL) portrays adultery? Some people might say yes. What is not offensive to one may be shocking to others.

Most high school students have been exposed to foul language and explicit sex from a very early age. The electronic media (U) is greatly responsible for this. I believe that a few explicit paragraphs in a book will do little to enlightend an already worldly child to the evil ways of the world. If people are afraid [that] children will be shocked or offended by certain books then they can put little markers on them saying that these materials might be offensive to some people. These little markers might even work to some advantage. A child who rarely reads might be enticed to read some fine literature.

I believe that the school board should not be given the power to exercise censorship. Censorship in any form is an evil thing that can have catastrophic consequences. Lord Acton (U) put it best when he stated, "All power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely." (UL) We must not allow this to happen.

Note: U = Unused information; UL = Unused, linked information.